

Merce's Ashes – Transcription from February 2020

A conversation between Gerry Morita and Jen Mesch
Recorded by Scott Smallwood, Edited by Jen Mesch

Jen: How' s it going, Gerry?

Gerry: So far, so good

Jen: Cool.

Gerry: How are you, Jen?

Jen: I' m good, yeah, so Cunningham.

Gerry: Yeah...

Jen: Have you actually seen the movie yet?

Gerry: I haven' t seen the movie; I've only seen the trailer. It' s got a lot of the unitards that you know and love,

Jen: Yeah

Gerry: Yeah, there' s like a lot of one-piece, one-color. I' m kind of excited about not knowing what happens in the movie because I can kind of guess what happens, but I don' t know anything about the drama of the lineage or uh, the ins and outs of the dancers.

Jen: It's funny you say that because one thing I noticed...because I studied Cunningham when I was in university, not just the technique but in dance history I had to write a paper... he was the only choreographer that I ever read about where there was no mention about any of that, like, Balanchine drama! - like you know (Balanchine) dated or married almost every ballerina and....

Gerry: Whoops...

Jen: Haha - like yeah - I remember complaining to my professor about it - I was like, you know, why is this stuff important? And then she had things to say about power dynamics and art and when people are intimately intertwined that has an effect.

Gerry: (Cunningham) was a dancer who worked with Martha Graham, right?

Jen: Right.

Gerry: And he had crazy hair - I remember we watched a movie of his early work and we watched it, you know on 16 millimeter in a university class and it was such a weird artifact. And then the work itself just looked so massively random - a cacophony of sounds and these dancers doing these very serious things that seem to mean nothing

Jen: I' m so jealous that you got to actually see film of him though, because you know - when did YouTube videos of dance actually start becoming at least good enough quality that it would hold your attention - like last five years or something like that

I don' t know – I just kept hearing about how his pieces didn't have a story - the dancers didn't have characters and I just didn't understand that at all - and there was *no way* for me to see that. New York Public Library had all these old reel-to-reels that you could watch, and that' s what I did when I moved there just because I had never seen all these works like you just see one snapshot and you' re just - you can' t like fill in the blanks.

Gerry: Yeah, there's very little artifacts that were available of that whole era, like before even the mid-80s.

Jen: A couple of things that I've seen of Merce's have been specifically for film but so much dance footage is just archival like documentation, like let's just put a wide frame on the whole action.

Gerry: It's still hard to show the dimensionality the dancer is sort of like a starfish

Jen: Almost like an armature

Gerry: I think Cage had a huge influence on later artists, I mean dance artists

Jen: yeah

Gerry: The Cage/Cunningham way of making work non-linearly and treating all the objects in the space and time as equal. ..

Gerry: Let's start over hahaha

Jen: You want to start over? No, let's just keep going... What do you like about doing Cunningham technique?What are you doing right now, Gerry?

Gerry: I'm really thinking a lot about that arm reach, how to reach your arms without making them ballet-like - that's interesting to me. What I don't like about it is that it's so upright like ballet, and you don't get to go to the floor or really use momentum in the way that I enjoy. And there's like a... like a removed state almost like an observer or a witness.

Jen: That sense of no character really became apparent to me once I saw live Cunningham. The dancers started smiling and laughing at each other - and I was like I was like oh no they're breaking character! And then I just realized, but there is no character! it's Cunningham! and it's allowed! like they're not trying to *not* do that - they just - laughed - I'm *sure* this will come up in the film. Most of the time, I think they're serious just because they have to concentrate so much.

Gerry: Because - the way I learned it was sort of like a mishmash, like mostly Cunningham but Limón and Graham all together.

Jen: In terms of focus? or in terms of technique?

Gerry: Well, when I learned, it was all like a big soup of modern dance.

Jen: Yeah me too. I think that's trademark of late 80s early 90's, right? (laughter)

Gerry: Derivative modern dance (laughter)

Jen: Even in the late 80s and 90s, I mean we're talking about 50 years, 40 years after the pioneers - it's like old news by then. Here we are like 30 years later and we still have to explain what we're doing.

Gerry: Cunningham...What's with the face?

Jen: His face, how he kind of looks like the Grinch? (Laughter)

Jen: I have a Merce Cunningham watch.

Gerry: Like..... does it have his face?

Jen: And there's an arm, and the extended arm and the extended leg are the watch hands. **Gerry:** Oh the watch hands so they just kind of like ...

Jen: Yeah exactly no joints

Gerry: yeah, I used to be able to do that (laughter)

Jen: Yeah that' s right...too bad I can' t do *that* anymore (laughter)

Did you know *Madonna* studied with Martha Graham? and *Woody Allen*?

Gerry: Ha! Woody Allen

Jen: Yeah, that' s in her autobiography (laughter) that' s another dance show (laughter)

Gerry: I like it when Merce jumps.

Jen: Oh yeah, so Stephan (Moore) was visiting us and he says..."I have some of Merce' s ashes." And, I was like, "Well! I think that's really great." And he said really awkwardly, like "Um, I still have some left you know, would you ...I don' t know, like would you be interested in having one of the packets of Merce' s ashes?" And I was just stunned...like flattered...and I just I didn' t know what to say. And he said, "You know, you' re the one that led me to Merce, I feel like you should have them."

I just started thinking about like, what do you do with a pack of Merce Cunningham' s ashes?

Gerry: I think you would get like a jar with a small little tiny...

Jen: But then like... what do you.. like pull it out to show people? Like I admired him so much...maybe *too* much, but I wouldn' t like ...build a shrine or something in my home. I was like, "You know, I think I' m not the right person."

Gerry: I think there' s a larger problem in society of what to do with ashes.

Jen: But I don' t know! What would you do if you were offered Merce' s ashes?

Gerry: I' d take them to a nice field...and set them free.